

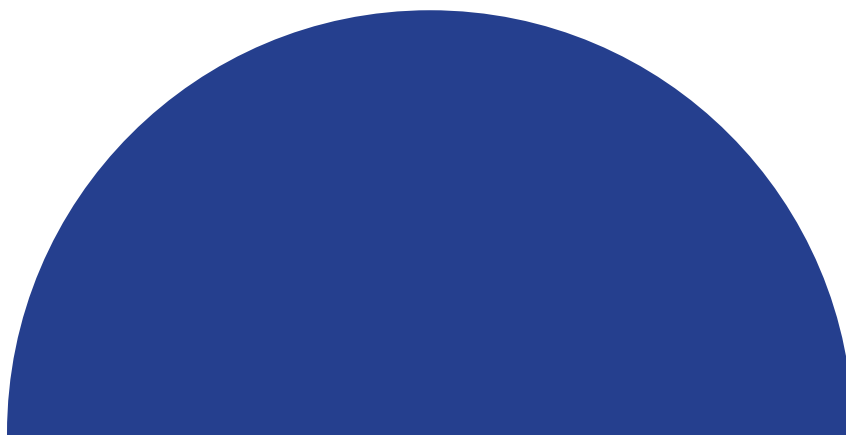
RESEARCH:
THE EFFECT OF DISINFORMATION
AND FOREIGN INFLUENCES
ON THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES
IN NORTH MACEDONIA



2022

RESEARCH REPORT
METAMORPHOSIS
FOUNDATION

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**THE EFFECT OF DISINFORMATION
AND FOREIGN INFLUENCES
ON THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES
IN NORTH MACEDONIA**



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INTRODUCTION: CITIZENS DEMAND

PROTECTION FROM DISINFORMATION

| Bardhyl Jashari

In North Macedonia and the Western Balkan region, foreign malign influence through disinformation campaigns come in waves, depending on the political situation in the region or in a specific country of the region. While the intensity of this flow has differed over the last few years, as did the kind, which targets various potentially divisive issue in the given moment, there wasn't a period in which it has paused.

Nonetheless, countries from the Western Balkans show significant weaknesses in dealing with harmful, undemocratic, and malignant foreign influences. Common traits of such influences had been promoting populism and inducing passivity, undermining trust in democratic institutions and integrative processes, including advocating false claims equating democracies with authoritarian regimes, to justify their actions and portray them as normal and unavoidable.

Thus the importance of this research that indicates, contrary to the past, when disinformation related to foreign malign influences was virtually a taboo topic in the media, citizens of North Macedonia have increased awareness of the problem.

Most importantly, the Metamorphosis survey of nationally representative sample shows that over 83% of the respondents agree with the statement "Disinformation are very harmful and had to be sanctioned by law" (50.8% strongly agree and 32.3% mostly agree). Moreover, 90.8% of the respondents said that "the government needs to take measures to deal with disinformation in the media."

Citizens identify the politicians (91%), journalists/media (90%), the social media (81%) and internet portals (78%) as the main sources of disinformation. In their opinion, three most important measures to deal with disinformation include:

- journalists to adhere to their professional standards and mind the truthfulness of the content they publish (79%),
- adopting a law against disinformation in the media (74%) and
- continuous reporting about harmful influence of disinformation and fake news in the media (62%).

I believe that The Anti-Disinformation Hub project contributed in debunking the chief propaganda claims that deny the existence of foreign malign influence and neglecting its effects, providing evidence about the actual situation and its negative effects. The outputs of this project along with the results of this survey provides a public record and undeniable evidence of the negative impact of malign influences on our society. Metamorphosis Foundation will continue to work on its mission “to strengthen the awareness and capacity of citizens and civil society to assume their fullest possible role as activists for democracy”. This is possible only if citizens have the skills and knowledge to demand and have access true, accurate and on-time information that help them make informed decisions affecting their quality of life.



INTRODUCTION

The « Anti-Disinformation Hub: Exposing Malign Influences through Watchdog Journalism» project aims to expose the main propaganda claims that deny the existence of harmful foreign influences in the Republic of North Macedonia aimed at undermining democracy. It is part of the ongoing efforts of the Metamorphosis Foundation and a network of media, investigative journalists, and analysts to document the situation and unmask the disinformation by providing evidence of the factual situation. Created public records based on a transparent methodological approach to fact-checking refute the central principles of anti-democratic and populist propaganda.

Knowledge from research and journalism is the basis for an advocacy initiative that brings together relevant stakeholders (government institutions, media associations, individual media, civil society organizations, the scientific and educational community, and the private sector) to counter the toxic effects of disinformation by creating an effective model with the inclusion of all stakeholders. Empirical data from the research enable the advocacy initiative to encourage the appropriate change of public policies and concrete activities to reduce the harmful effects of hostile foreign influences.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To enable the advocacy process and encourage an appropriate change of media policies within the project, public opinion research was conducted which examined the positions and attitudes of the population in North Macedonia regarding the issues of dissemination of disinformation, interest in policy change, and the impact of foreign and domestic sources of disinformation in the context of NATO and EU integration, as well as their susceptibility to various forms of foreign malign influences.

In addition to the quantitative research, with a part of gaining in-depth insight into the situation as well as receiving recommendations for creating media policies, three focus groups were conducted with relevant representatives from state institutions, media, civil society sector, and academic sector.

As a result of the research, recommendations were adopted for measures to be taken by the relevant state institutions for proactive deterrence of operations of foreign malign influences in the country.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research methodology was used to conduct the research. The data collection technique consisted of conducting a telephone survey (CATI) using a computer, online through the SurveyMonkey platform, which specializes in this type of research. Data were processed using the descriptive statistics method using the SPSS software program (IBM SPSS Statistics Program).

To achieve the objectives of the research, an expert hired by Metamorphosis prepared a questionnaire of 109 variables developed into 39 closed-ended and open-ended questions. To check the logic and clarity of the questions, the questionnaire was tested with a pilot survey of 10% of the total samples followed by additional corrections of a technical nature.

For the purposes of this research, a quantitative research methodology using a highly stratified representative sample was used. According to the geo-demographic structure of the population, North Macedonia is divided into eight regions: Skopje, Polog, Pelagonija, Vardar, Northeast, Southeast, Southwest, and East, into urban and rural communities. The number of respondents is proportional to the total population in each region.

The main sample contains 1100 households. Each household is represented by a respondent aged 18+.

The research included a total of 46 municipalities, covering urban and rural areas, representatively selected from all eight statistical regions in the country. The fieldwork took place from February 19th to March 5th, 2022.

The statistical error for research of this type is + / -3%, which is a normal deviation for this representative sample.

ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS OF THE PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

| Dissemination of disinformation

The media are an integral part of any democratic society that has an extremely significant influence on the attitudes and way of thinking of the public. The role of the media in any society is to inform and educate the public about issues and events and to promote a sense of belonging and community. It also has the power to influence and manipulate public opinion, and as such is a powerful political tool. The media is known to be the most powerful means of communication. The ability to shape public opinion online has also given people new ways to express their opinions. The Internet and social media have made it relatively easy for people to spread information and disinformation. It is often said that disinformation spreads faster on social networks than it can be verified. Fake news or disinformation has an inseparable connection with every sphere of the society in which we live. It is worrying that this disinformation easily finds the shortest way to reach the public, and that is the media.

The electronic media, the Internet and the print media are all subsets of the mass media. Newspapers, newsletters, brochures, and magazines are included in the print media, while electronic media consist of radio, television, and other forms of communication.

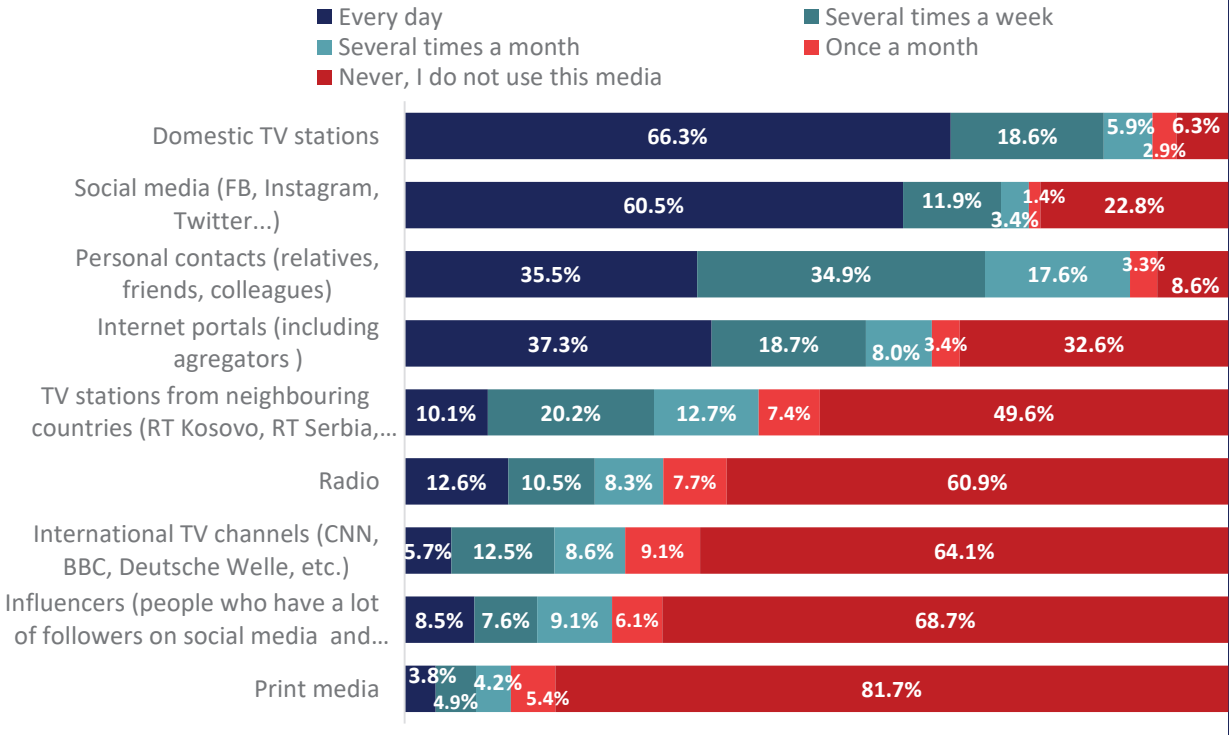
Domestic TV stations are the most influential media in North Macedonia, informing 66.3% of the respondents every day, and 18.6% of the respondents several times a week. Almost 5.9% said that they are informed through home TV stations several times a month, 2.9% once a month and 6.3% of the respondents said that they do not use this channel for information. Despite the increase in the number and availability of various communication platforms and technologies, according to the results of the survey, television retains its position as the most widely used source of information. **Social media** (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter ...) are the second most used media by 60.5% of respondents who said they follow it every day, and 11.9% are informed through this channel several times a week. 37.3% of the respondents are informed daily through **internet portals**, and 18.7% several times a week. Most of the citizens 70.4% (*35.5% every day and 34.9% several times a week*) are informed through friends, relatives, and a colleague, which means that **personal contacts** are the most frequent channel through which the respondents want to share, receive but also check the information. Influencers, international TV channels, and radio are not used at all by more than half of the respondents. The use of print media as a source of information is not used by 81.7% of the respondents and we can say that they are in a position of stagnation or are declining.

In terms of cross-sectional results, the respondents who are informed every day through television and through personal contacts (relatives, colleagues, and friends) are the population group aged 65+ who use these channels in a higher

percentage than young respondents aged up to 29 years old, who primarily use social media. Citizens with completed primary and less than primary education and rural citizens as a primary choice of information use home TV stations compared to citizens with higher or faculty education and urban respondents who rely most on social networks.

1. How often do you get information from the following channels?

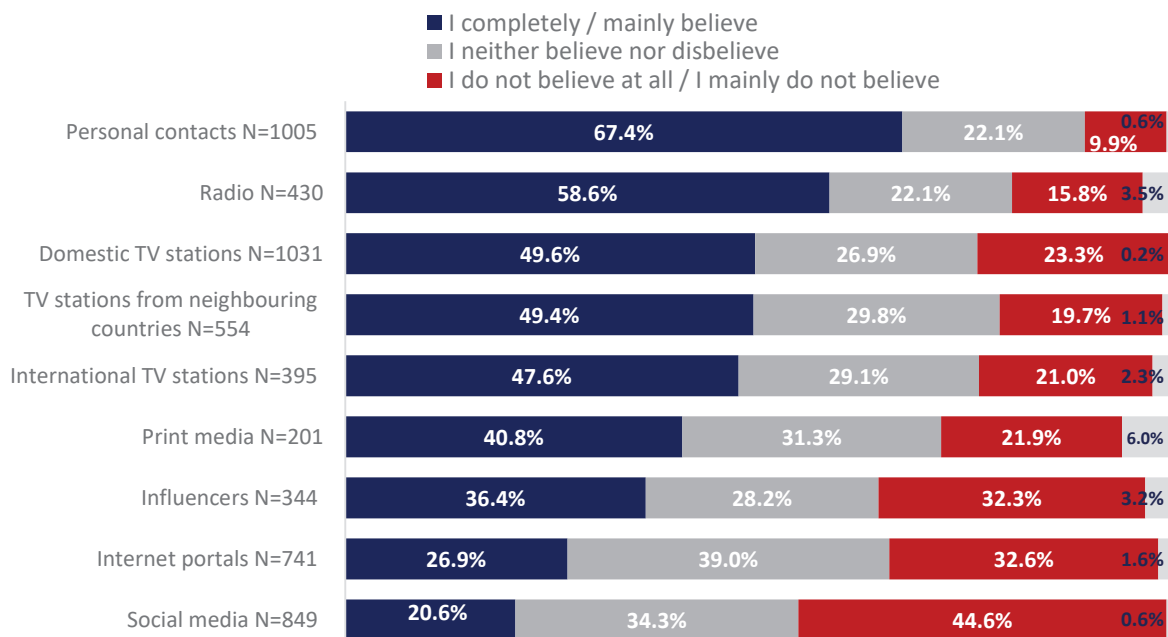
N=1100



Only the respondents who answered that they are informed by one of the mentioned channels answered the second question from this set. Thus, the answers to the question: **“To what extent do you trust the following media / sources of information?”** show that 67.4% of the respondents (mainly/completely believe) trust personal contacts the most (family, colleagues, friends), which also use them as a source of information. The percentage of those who trust the information received via radio is 58.6% (mainly/completely believe). Half of the respondents trust domestic TV channels and TV stations from neighboring countries. The least reliable source/medium of information according to 44.6% of respondents (mainly/I do not believe at all) are social media, followed by Internet portals (32.6%) and influencers (32.3%). According to this, it can be said that the respondents who regularly use social media and internet portals as a daily source from which they are informed, show more distrust in the information provided by the media, than the respondents who are regularly informed through television or friends. Cross-sectional results show that trust in social media and Internet portals is highest in the 18-29 age group and then begins to decline. Respondents with primary education and those living in rural areas trust domestic TV channels more than respondents with secondary, higher and faculty education and respondents from urban areas.

2. How much do you trust the following media/sources of information?

Answers from respondents that answered Q1 that get information from the given media

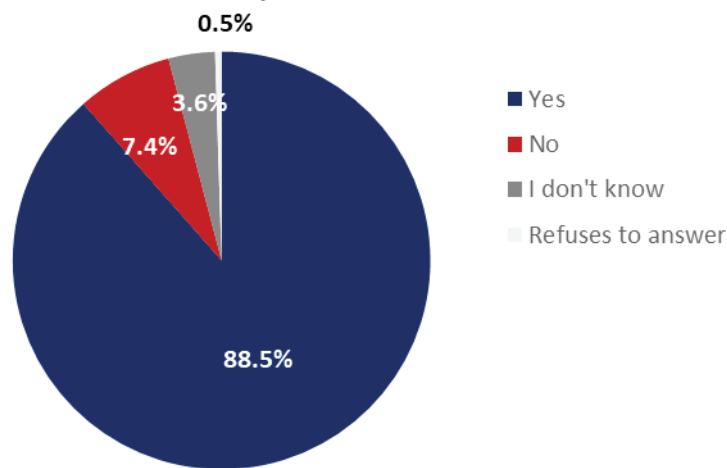


From the table below we can see additional cross-referenced data that indicate that respondents who use domestic TV channels and personal contacts on a daily basis show more confidence in the information provided by these two media than respondents who daily say that they are informed through social media.

Q1. How often do you get information from the following information channels?										
EVERY DAY										
Q2. To what extent do you trust the following media / information sources?		Domestic TV stations	TV stations from neighboring countries	International TV channels	Radio	Print media	Internet portals	Social media	Influencers	Personal contacts
Domestic TV stations	I trust it to some extent	45%	27%	27%	52%	26%	45%	42%	44%	48%
	I completely trust it	13%	19%	28%	14%	38%	12%	9%	19%	12%
Internet portals	I trust it to some extent	21%	24%	33%	23%	18%	28%	24%	29%	30%
	I completely trust it	6%	17%	27%	7%	32%	6%	5%	16%	6%
Social media	I trust it to some extent	16%	24%	33%	17%	24%	21%	19%	33%	20%
	I completely trust it	4%	11%	19%	5%	22%	6%	4%	11%	6%
Personal contacts	I trust it to some extent	57%	46%	36%	54%	26%	55%	57%	43%	59%
	I completely trust it	16%	26%	30%	28%	43%	23%	16%	29%	24%

Most of the citizens (88.5%) believe that disinformation, i.e. fake news is a serious problem in our country. Only 7.4% of the citizens gave a negative answer. Regarding the responses of various socio-demographic groups, it is noted that citizens over the age of 50 agree more with the claim that fake news is a serious problem than younger people. In addition, ethnic Macedonians and citizens with secondary, higher and faculty education agree more with this statement, than ethnic Albanians and citizens with primary and less than primary education.

4. Do you think that disinformation, fake news, are a serious problem in our country? N=1100



The next question examines how often citizens notice information in the media that is inaccurate or misrepresents reality. Thus, according to the graph below, it can be seen that most of the citizens (34.1% every day or almost every day, 34.9% at least once a week) notice incorrect information. About 15.9% answered that they notice incorrect information several times a month, 4.3% once a month and only 2.6% never noticed such disinformation.

Demographic analysis indicates significant statistical differences in the responses of different groups of respondents. Men, respondents under the age of 50, respondents with secondary, higher and faculty education, ethnic Macedonians and those living in urban areas, notice more inaccurate information conveyed by the media compared to other groups of respondents.

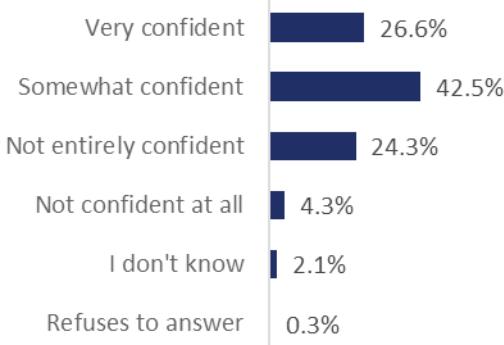
5. How often do you notice information in the media that is inaccurate or misinterprets reality? N=1100



A quarter of the citizens are **very confident** in their ability to recognize the fake news or disinformation of the media from which they are informed, and four out of ten respondents (42.5%) are **somewhat confident**. About a quarter of the citizens (23.3%) are **not completely confident**, and 4.3% are **not at all confident** in their ability to recognize fake news. We can conclude that most of the citizens who notice fake news and disinformation on a daily basis are also confident in their ability to recognize them.

The cross-referenced results show us statistically significant differences in the answers of different groups of respondents. Thus, men, respondents under 50 and respondents with higher education are largely confident in their ability to recognize false news or disinformation in the media from which they are informed compared to other groups of respondents.

6. How confident are you in your ability to notice fake news or disinformation in the media you read and watch? N=1100

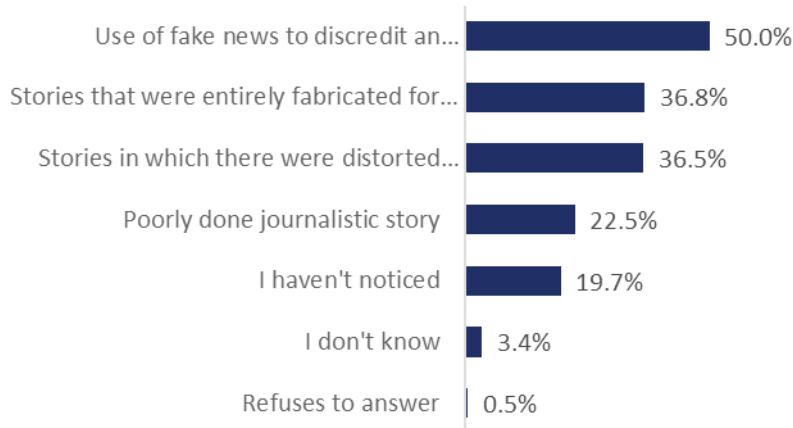


To the last question of this set which reads: **“Last week in the media you read or watch did you come across the following: ”**, half of the respondents answered that they noticed the use of fake news to discredit an organization, party, state. Every third respondent (37%) came across stories in which there were distorted facts in order to achieve someone’s agenda and stories in which they were completely fabricated for political purposes / agendas. About a quarter of the citizens came across a poorly done journalistic story, and 19.7% did not notice any of the above.

The results of the cross-tabulations show that compared to women, men noticed more stories that were completely fabricated. Respondents under the age of 29 are more likely to come across a poorly done journalistic story than respondents over the age of 50; also persons aged 30-49 years compared to the oldest 65+ years. Respondents with secondary, higher and faculty education noticed more of these situations compared to respondents with primary and less than primary education.

7. Last week in the media you read or watch, did you come across the following:

(More answers are possible) N=1100



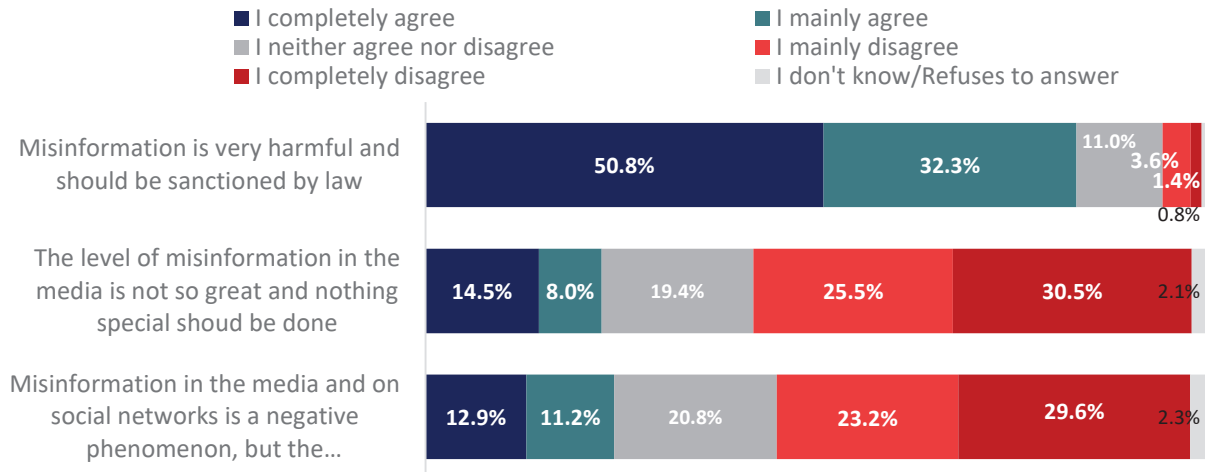
INTEREST IN POLICY CHANGES

In the second set of the research, the main emphasis was to examine the opinion of the citizens on taking measures to deal with disinformation in the media, the degree of agreement and importance, as well as familiarity with the fact-checking and disinformation services.

The graph below shows some statements regarding the negative effects of disinformation in the media. All respondents had to express their level of agreement with each statement. The majority of citizens think that *disinformation is very harmful and should be sanctioned by law* (50.8% fully agree and 32.3% generally agree), and only 5% of citizens do not agree with this statement (1, 6% do not agree at all and 3.6% generally agree). About a quarter of citizens agree with the following statements: *the level of disinformation in the media is not so great and nothing special should be done* (14.5% completely agree and 8.0% generally agree), and *the consequences of disinformation are minor* (12.9% completely agree and 11.2% generally agree). The results show that the citizens clearly express their consent that the disinformation in the media is harmful, the consequences are not minor and that should be sanctioned by law.

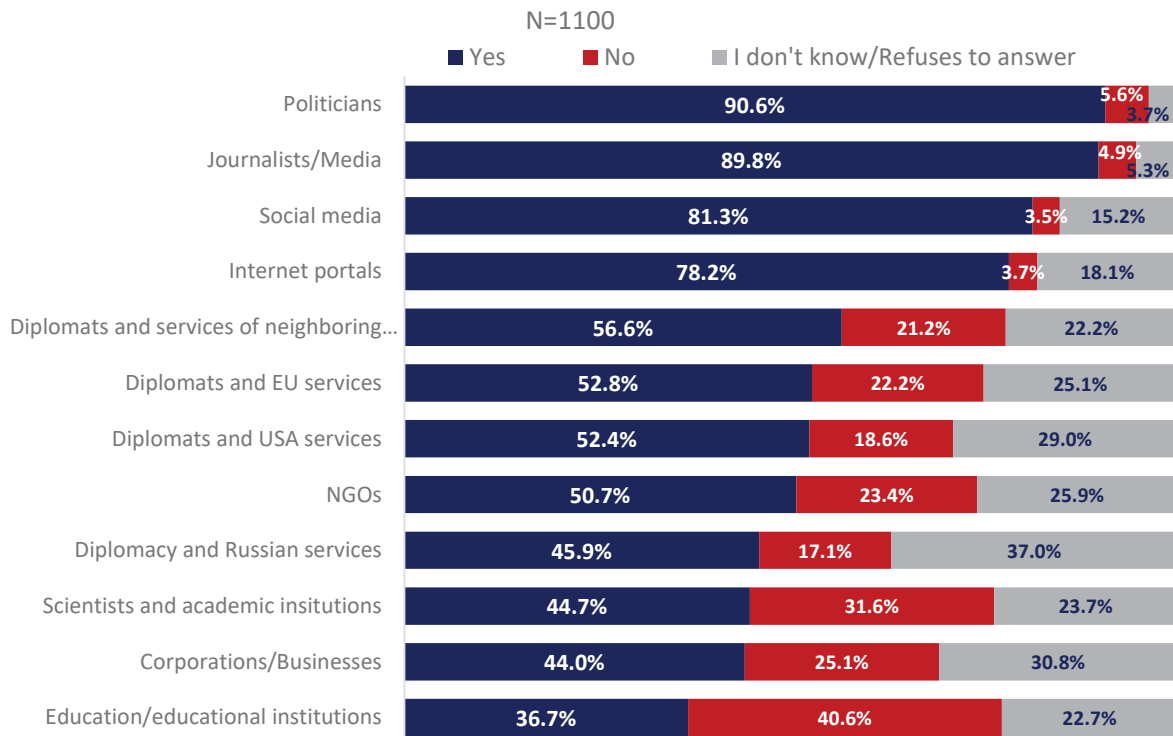
Demographic analysis indicates statistically significant differences in the responses of different groups of respondents. Respondents over 29 years of age, with secondary and faculty education, respondents from urban areas, ethnic Macedonians and respondents who are employed, unemployed and retired show greater agreement that disinformation in the media is harmful, the consequences are not minor and it should be sanctioned by law, compared to other groups of respondents.

8. How much do you agree with the following statements? Use numbers from 1 to 5 where 1 is you do not agree at all, and 5 is that you completely agree. N=1100



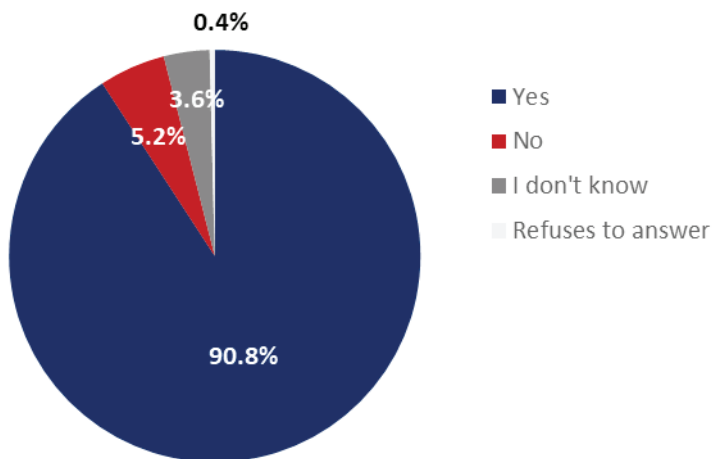
On the next question, the citizens expressed their opinion on the factors through which disinformation is spread in the country. Politicians (90.6%) and journalists / media (89.8%) are the main actors in spreading false news, say most of the respondents. They are followed by social media (81.3%) and internet portals (78.2%). Four out of ten respondents (40.6%) stated that educational institutions and education are not responsible for spreading disinformation.

9. According to your personal experience, which of the following actores disseminate disinformation in our country:



Analyzing the answers of the respondents to the question that reads: ***“In your opinion, should the government take measures to deal with disinformation in the media?”***, we conclude that the majority of citizens (90.8%) answered positively and agree with this view, only 5.2% of citizens gave a negative answer, and 3.6% are not familiar.

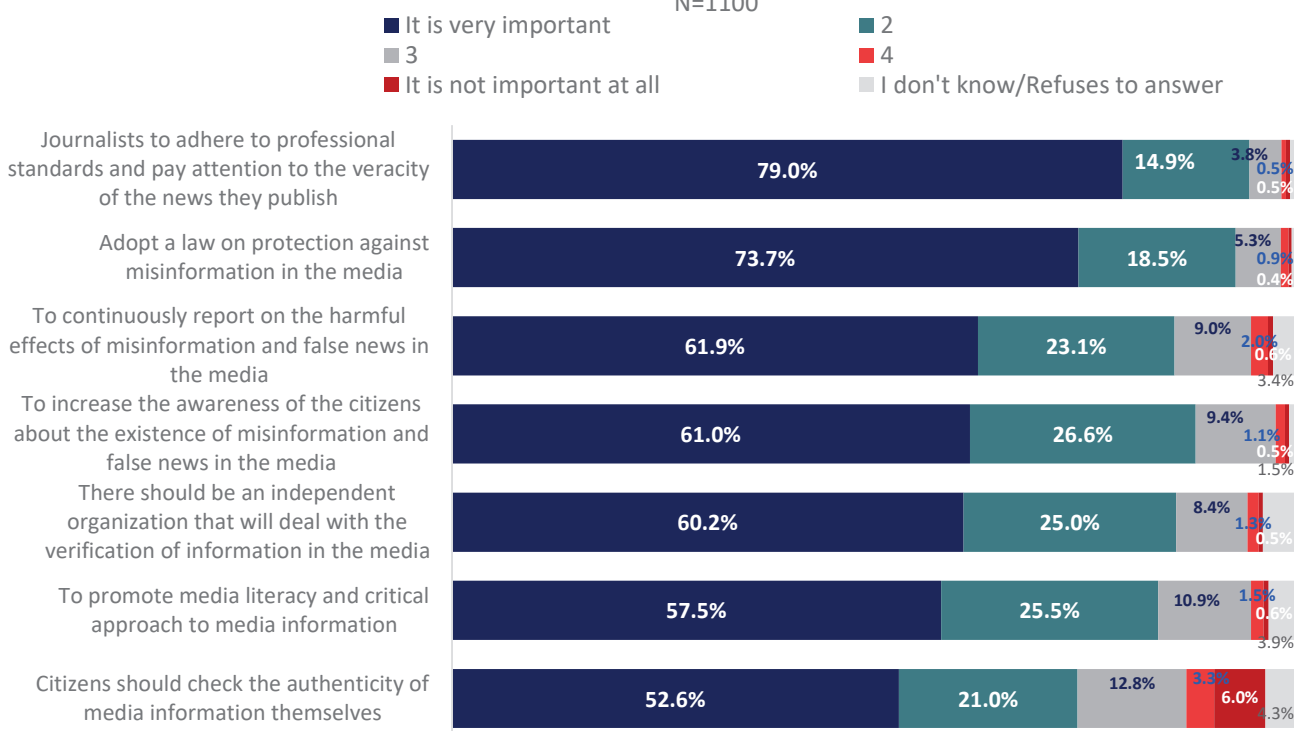
10. In your opinion, should the government take measures to deal with misinformation in the media? N=1100



The three most important measures for dealing with disinformation according to the majority of citizens are the following: *journalists to adhere to professional standards and pay attention to the veracity of the news they publish (79%), adoption of a law on protection against disinformation in the media (73.7%), continuous reporting on the harmful impact of disinformation and fake news in the media (61.9%)*. But as can be seen from the chart below, most of the respondents think that the application of all of the above measures is important in order to prevent the spread of fake news in the media.

11. To what extent do you agree with the following statements? Use numbers 1 to 5 where 1 means that it is not important at all, and 5 means that you think it is very important.

N=1100



Respondents were asked whether the portals in their legal status should be equated with other media and function as media under the same legal answers. According to their answers, 77.1% of the respondents answered positively to this question, only 8.5% gave a negative answer, and 13.7% of the respondents are not familiar with the topic.

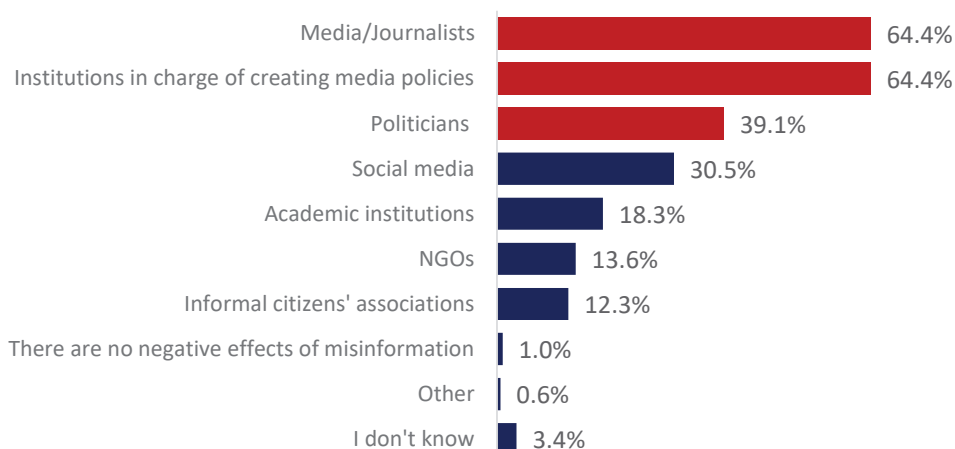
Most of the respondents (73.5%) believe that online portals have a responsibility to protect their readers from disinformation, while 10.6% do not agree with this statement or answered negatively. About 15.3% do not know how to answer this question.

N=1100		
12. According to current laws, portals and social networks are not regulated in the same way as other media (TV, radio, press). In your opinion, should the portals be equated with other media in the legal status and function as media under the same legal responsibilities?	Yes	77,1%
	No	8,5%
	I don't know	13,7%
	Refuses to answer	0,6%
13. Do you think online portals have a responsibility to protect their readers from disinformation?	Yes	73,5%
	No	10,6%
	I don't know	15,3%
	Refuses to answer	0,6%

Citizens believe that the **media/journalists and institutions in charge of creating media policies** have a major role in reducing the negative effects of disinformation in the media and this is the opinion of 64.4% of respondents. In third place are politicians, according to 39.1% of respondents. The results show that informal associations, CSOs and academic institutions do not play a major role in reducing the negative effects of disinformation in the media. When it comes to the main actors for disinformation, the respondents mentioned **the politicians** in the first place, the media / journalists in the second place, and the social media in the third place. They believe that the main role in reducing the negative effects of disinformation is played by the media / journalists and the institutions in charge of creating media policies that should adhere to stricter professional standards and pay attention to the truth of the news.

Statistically significant differences were observed with respect to socio-demographic groups. Seen through the prism of ethnicity, the results differ among ethnic Macedonians and Albanians. Ethnic Macedonians much more than ethnic Albanians believe that institutions, politicians and social media have a leading role in reducing the negative effects of disinformation. People over the age of 50 are more likely to think that politicians play a major role. According to respondents with secondary, higher and faculty education, institutions, politicians and social media have a leading role to play in reducing the negative effects of disinformation compared to respondents with primary and lower secondary education.

14. According to you, which of the following actors should have the leading role in the decreasing of the negative effects caused by disinformation in the media? (Several answers are possible) N=1100



Four out of ten respondents (40.9%) are familiar with the Code of Journalists which defines professional standards that journalists should adhere to, and more than half of respondents (56.8%) answered that they are not familiar with it. 34.4% of the respondents are familiar with the Media Ethics Council, while 64.2% are not familiar with it.

INFLUENCE OF FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC SOURCES OF DISINFORMATION

The third part examines the impact of foreign and domestic sources of disinformation and people's opinion on various statements on current topics in the country: Covid-19, EU accession, climate change, etc. Due to the current situation with Ukraine and Russia, it is possible that there will be a shift in the results, especially in the attitudes.

Seven out of ten (70.8%) citizens believe that *there is a secret group of powerful individuals in the world who control global events, both wars and economic crises*, and 11.6% gave a neutral answer to this question. About 11.0% of the respondents do not believe in this statement at all.

Regarding views on Covid-19, 64% of respondents believe that *Covid-19 was created intentionally, so that world powers could have economic and political benefits*. More unvaccinated citizens than vaccinated citizens agree with this position by 10%. In addition, more than half of the citizens believe that *the world's elites created Covid-19 to reduce the number of people on the planet*. On the other hand, 45.4% said that they **do not believe** that *Covid-19 exists, but is just a conspiracy of the world elite to take away our freedom*.

In terms of attitudes and beliefs about climate change, half of respondents (51.9%) **do not believe** in the statement that *climate change does not exist, but*

were invented to control the economy. With this cross-sectional view, it can be seen that two out of ten citizens (20%) from rural areas believe that climate change does not exist unlike the respondents from urban areas. One third of citizens believe that *climate change is controlled by satellites and radars*, while almost as many do not believe in this statement.

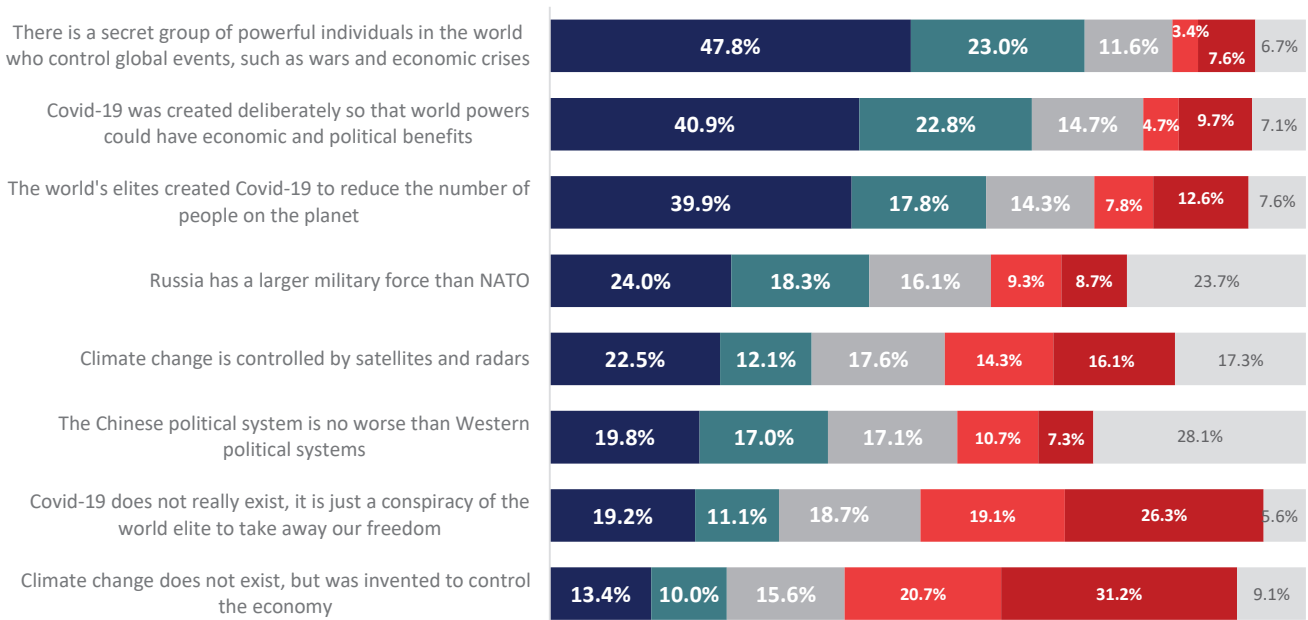
About 42.3% of respondents believe that *Russia has a larger military force than NATO*, 18% do not believe this, and 16.1% answered neutrally.

Three out of ten citizens believe in the statement that the Chinese political system is no worse than Western political systems, and just as much do not know or refused to answer. About 18.0% of respondents said they did not believe this statement.

19. To what extent do you agree with the following statements:

N=1100

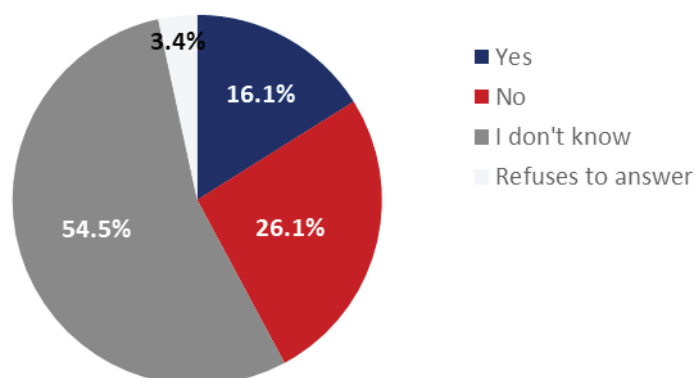
■ 5-I completely agree ■ 4 ■ 3 ■ 2 ■ 1- I do not agree at all ■ I don't know/Refuses to answer



To the next question **“According to your knowledge, are there sources / entities that promote Russian interests and views in the country?”**, 16.1% of respondents agree, i.e. gave a positive answer, 26.1% disagree, while more than half (54.5%) do not know the answer to this question.

Cross-referencing the results shows that the age group over 65, citizens with higher/faculty education, and citizens who usually vote in elections are more likely than other groups to have sources/entities that promote Russian interests and views in the country.

20. According to your knowledge, are there sources/entities that promote Russian interests and views in the country? N=1100



Respondents who answered the previous question “yes” answer the next question. Thus, 8.5% of the citizens answered that these are the political parties, followed by 4% of the citizens who said that these are the embassies, the military force, the threats for gas delivery and the political party “Levica”. Four out of ten citizens are not familiar with what those sources/entities are.

21. If yes, who are they?	
Answers from respondents that answered “YES” to Q20	
N=177	
Embassies	4,0%
Military force	4,0%
Threats of gas delivery	4,0%
I don't know	43,8%
CSOs	3,4%
Political party “Levica”	4,0%
Political parties	8,5%
Different type of media	10,2%
Russian influence through VMRO-DPMNE	2,8%
Slavic University in Sveti Nikole and Bitola	0,6%
With the unification of Orthodoxy	3,4%
Secret services	11,4%

Six out of ten respondents agree (40.3% completely agree and 19.3% generally agree) with the statement: *that the country should become an EU member, but without concessions with Bulgaria*, 15.0% answered neutrally, and 18, 7% do not agree with this statement (12.8% do not agree at all and 5.9% generally disagree).

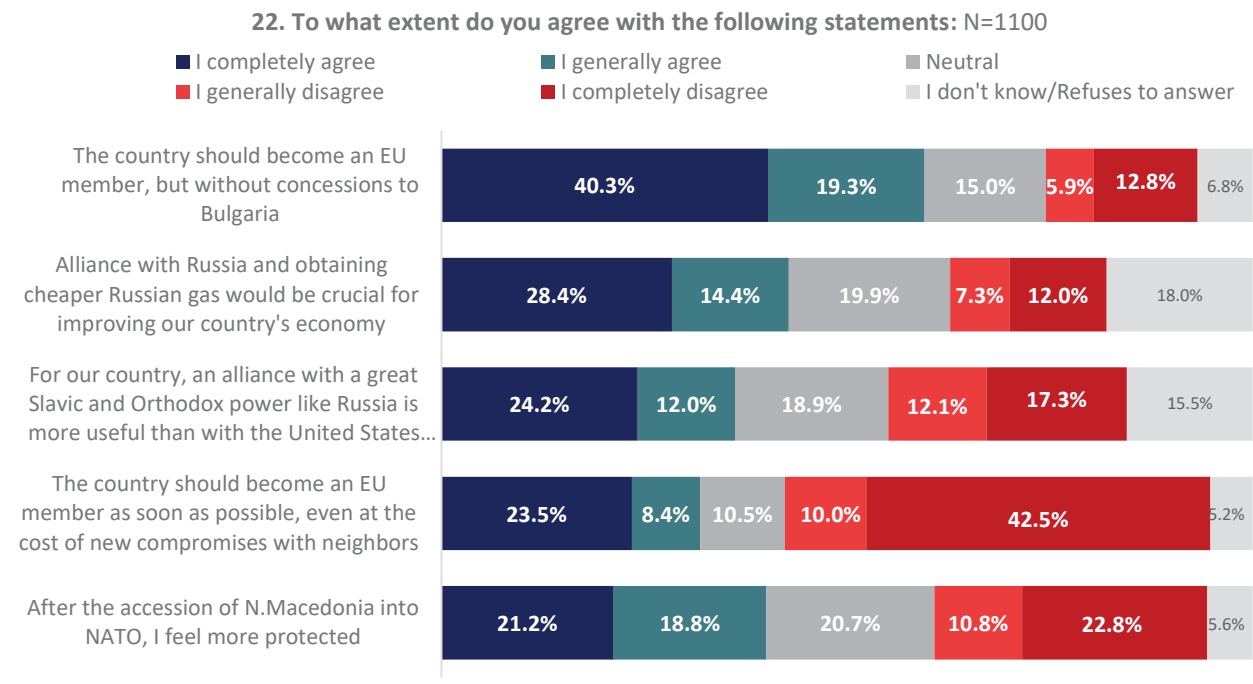
On the other hand, more than half of the citizens **do not agree** (I do not agree at all - 42.5% and generally disagree - 10.0%) with the view that *the country should become an EU member as soon as possible, even at the cost of new compromises with neighbors*, 32% agree (23.5% fully agree and 8.4% generally agree), and 10.5% are neutral about this statement. After the cross-referenced results, it can be noticed that young people up to 29 years old, citizens with primary and less

than primary education, citizens from rural areas, and ethnic Albanians agree, the contrary to other groups. The results show that most of the citizens agree that our country should join the EU, but not at the cost of compromises with neighboring countries.

Four out of ten agree (28.4% fully agree and 14.4% generally agree) that an *alliance with Russia and obtaining cheaper gas would be crucial for improving our country's economy*, 19.9% answered neutral, while 19.3% do not agree (12.0% do not agree at all and 7.3% generally disagree).

One-third of the citizens agreed (24.2% fully agree and 12.0% generally agree) with the statement: *An alliance with a great Slavic and Orthodox power like Russia is more useful for our country than an alliance with the US or the EU*, 18.9% gave a neutral answer, and 29.4% do not agree with the statement (17.3% do not agree at all and 12.1% generally disagree).

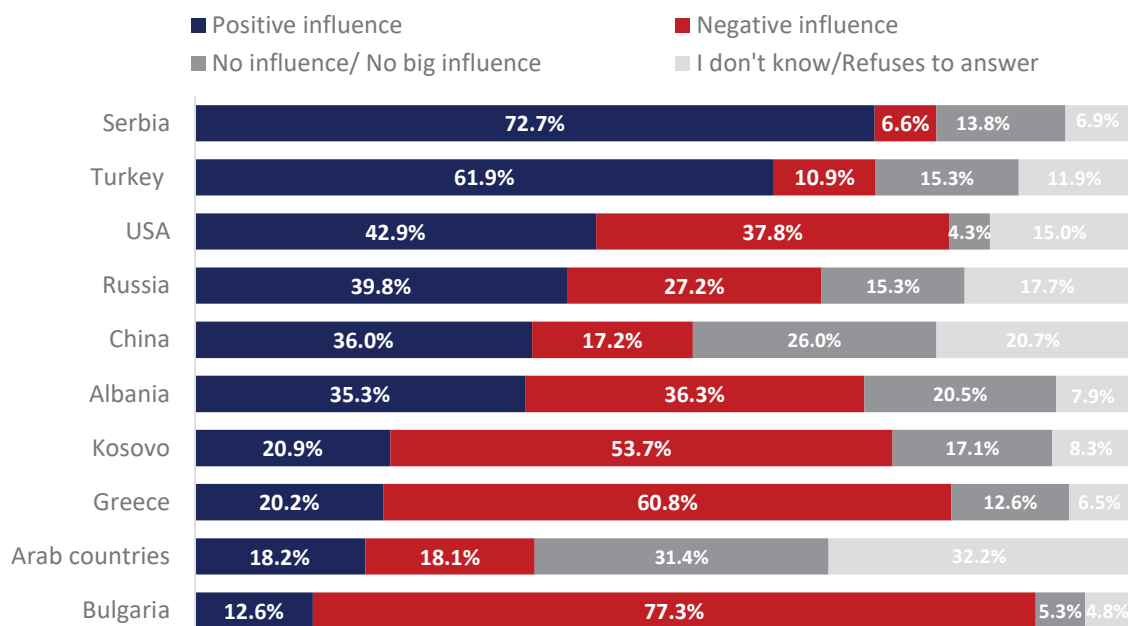
Four out of ten respondents agree (completely agree 21.2% and 18.8% mainly agree) with the position: *After the accession of North Macedonia to NATO I feel more protected*, and 33.6% disagree (do not agree at all - 22.8% and generally disagree - 10.8%). Regarding the cross-tabulation results and statistical differences, it can be seen that the age group over 65, the citizens from the urban environment, and the ethnic Macedonians, unlike the other groups of citizens, do not agree with this attitude.



Majority of citizens (72.7)% said that Serbia has a positive impact on our country, which indicates that this country has a good image among Macedonian citizens. Turkey is the second country for which six out of ten respondents said that it has a positive impact on our country, and the United States is positioned in third place according to 42.9% of respondents. Citizens have a divided opinion about the state of Albania, 36.3% say that it has a negative impact, and 35.3% that it has a positive impact.

A high 77.3% of the respondents agree that Bulgaria has a negative impact on our country, followed by Greece with 60.8%.

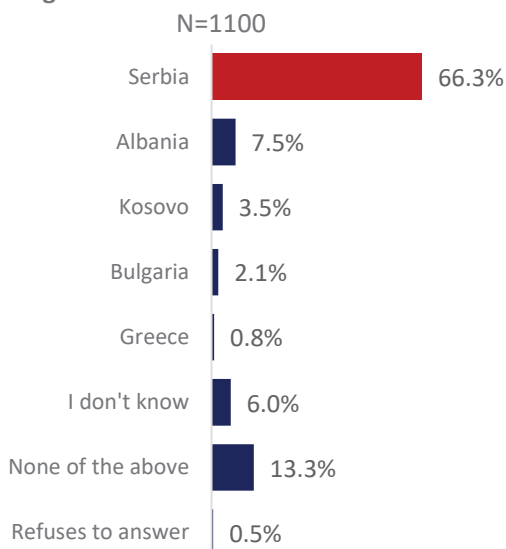
23. What kind of influence does each of the given countries have in our country? N=1100



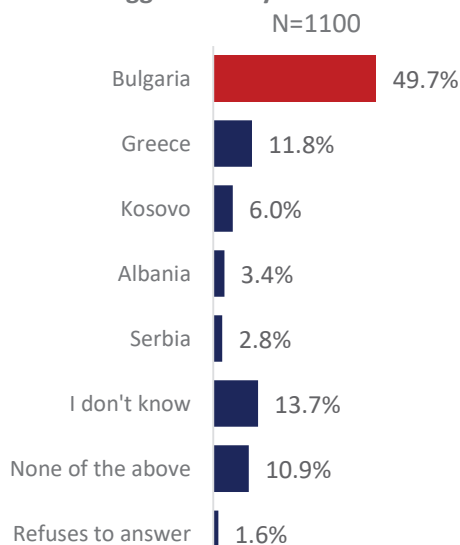
According to the survey, for 66.3% of the citizens, Serbia is the biggest friend of North Macedonia. In second place for almost one in ten respondents is Albania. 13.3% of the respondents answered that none of the mentioned countries is Macedonia's best friend.

For half of the citizens, Bulgaria is the biggest enemy of North Macedonia. It is followed by Greece with 11.8%. One in ten respondents stated that none of the neighboring countries is an enemy of ours. Due to the current situation with Bulgaria, such results are expected.

24. Which neighbouring country is the biggest friend of North Macedonia?

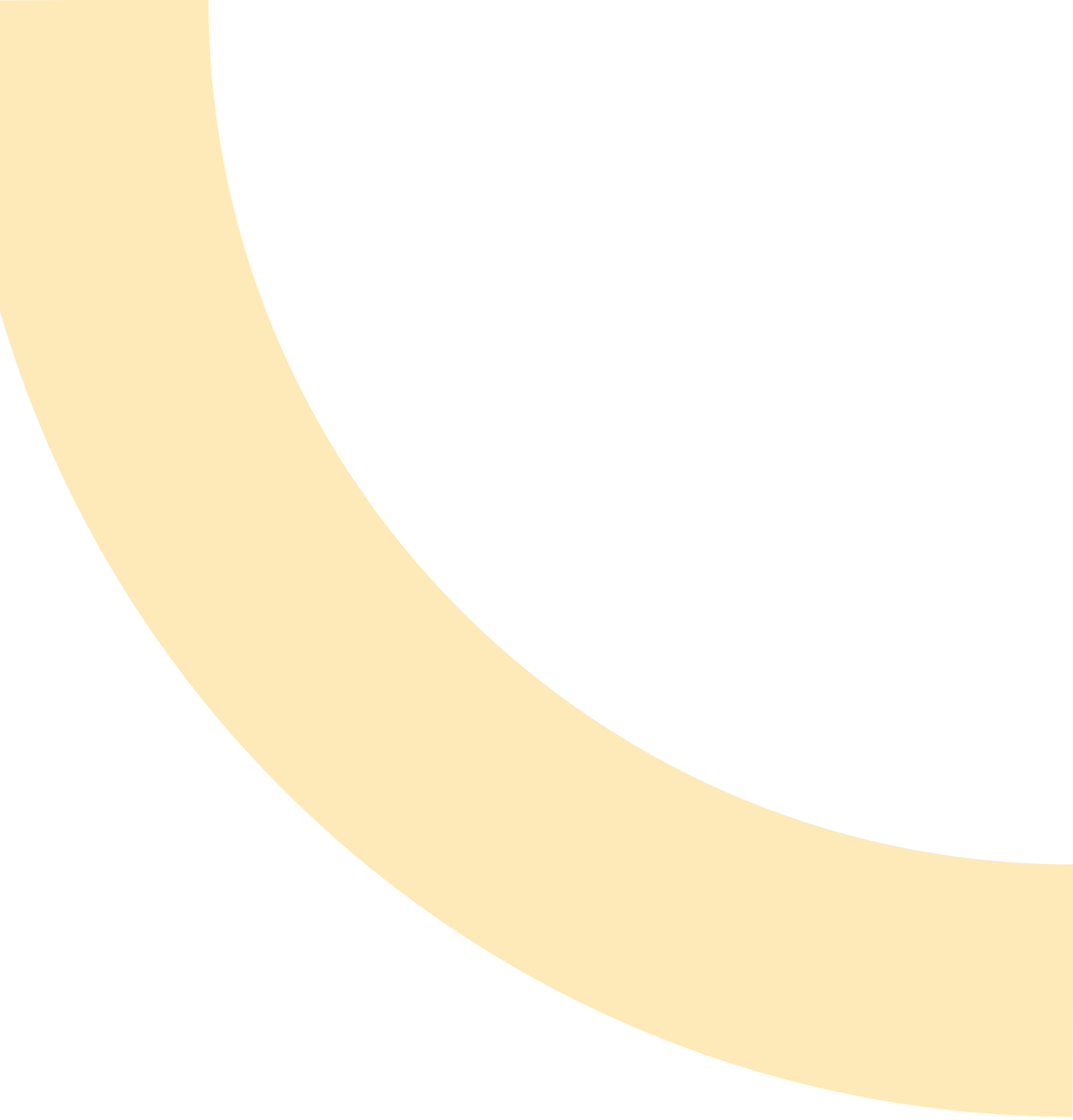


25. Which neighbouring country is the biggest enemy of North Macedonia?



DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE RESPONDENTS

Demographic Data	N=1100
Place of residence	%
City	67,8%
Village	32,2%
Gender	
Male	48,3%
Female	51,7%
Ethnicity	
Macedonian	74%
Albanian	23%
Other	4%
Age	
18-29	15,2%
30-49	40,4%
50-64	28,8%
65+	15,6%
Refuses to answer	0,0%
Education	
Primary education and less	12%
Secondary education	63%
Faculty, Mr., Dr.	25%
Employment Status	
Employed	50%
Unemployed	17%
Pupil/Student	6%
Housewife	5%
Retiree	20%
Other	3%
Region	
Vardar	7,1%
East	8,9%
Southwest	10,4%
Southeast	8,5%
Pelagonija	10,7%
Polog	15,3%
Northeast	8,1%
Skopje	31,0%



ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS OF THE FOCUS GROUPS

FOCUS GROUPS STRUCTURE

After analyzing the data obtained from the quantitative survey with the citizens, three focus groups were realized with representatives of relevant stakeholders in the country. This qualitative research approach offered in-depth insight into the research findings, as well as creating recommendations for media policies.

The first focus group with representatives of the journalistic profession - editors, journalists and fact-checkers, from traditional and online media was held on February 26, 2022.

The second group was held on March 29, 2022 and consisted of media analysts, members of regulatory and self-regulatory bodies, as well as representatives of the Parliamentary Institute and private research institutes.

The third focus group with analysts of the socio-political life in the country and representatives of the academic community was held on March 31, 2022.

KEY FINDINGS

DISSEMINATION OF DISINFORMATION IN THE MEDIA

The analysis of the domestic media space identified two types of disinformation: first, disinformation that occurs because of journalistic lapse, unprofessional journalistic work and lack of editorial policy, and second, fake news, i.e. malicious placement of certain narratives in the public sphere that result of organized, structured and conscious action to achieve a certain goal.

“When it comes to an unintentional mistake or lapse then it is much simpler; when the mistake is pointed out, whether by a fact-checking organization, or by a colleague, or by a self-regulatory body, the media withdraws the news and apologizes officially. When it comes to malicious placement of fake news, then the process does not go like this; then it is an organized, structured, conscious action where lies and disinformation are released into the public narrative for a specific purpose.”

“Most of the violations are related to disinformation ... (as a result of which) journalists and the media fail to check the news before publishing it ... the source of this disinformation is important ... most often foreign narratives are a compilation of lies that are placed by well-organized centers of power and we cannot equate them with the lapses made by the media at home”.

It was concluded that the online space, i.e. social networks and online portals, are a critical area for spreading disinformation. In the traditional media (TV and print media) disinformation is spread to a much lesser extent.

Most disinformation is found on social networks. Disinformation is often spread through the personal profiles of politicians and influencers, and during the pandemic, the personal profiles of doctors and medical professionals. Disinformation is also spread through various Facebook groups. In this regard, the personal profile of Gordana Godzo from the association "From Us to Us", the profile of Mike Tyson, a representative of the Q Movement in the country, as well as the Facebook group United Macedonia were especially pointed out.

The portals are not defined as media, they usually do not have an imprint and are not subject to the legislation in the country, which makes them suitable for placing and disseminating disinformation. In the race for publicity, and due to lack of journalistic capacity, portals often publish unverified news; portals also often republish news from each other, which allows very fast saturation of the internet space with disinformation.

"It is a fact that disinformation is much rarer in the newspaper because more attention is paid. But we as portals, even though we try, know how to fall for fake news for getting clicks. Fake photos and videos are appearing on the internet and we are downloading them from unreliable sources."

It has been observed that, very often, portals use social networks as a source of information, which allows someone's personal views to be presented as "official" information. For example, portals know how to publish the statement from a personal profile of a politician as an official position of a certain institution or political party. Having in mind this possibility, various political structures in the country use the portals as a mechanism for creating and disseminating disinformation. As a typical example of "abuse" of the Internet portal as a medium, the example of Petak Bogoevski was pointed out, who owns a portal and who places their political views in the media sphere.

"Disinformation is not present on TV, but mostly on Internet portals; they fall for certain views on social networks and take them as info. They settle for the status of politicians; they create news that is constantly being shared."

"Officials post an opinion on their profile, and then some portal republishes it, and they post this one on their profile. If we all inform correctly ... there will be no need for fact checking, but when half of the portals blindly transfer the FB status of a mayor ..."

In the traditional media (TV and print media) disinformation is spread to a lesser extent. However, debate shows as well as other types of programs in which guests and experts from different fields appear allow dissemination of disinformation through the media.

“Watch Alpha TV and see what kind of shows they host, what kind of guests they invite ... There is also a Klan TV ... it has no impressium, no impressium on national television, and there is a regulator that allows this type of lapses to pass... ”

| INFLUENCE OF FOREIGN DISINFORMATION SOURCES

Russian influence in the country was rated as the strongest of all foreign influences. Russia is expanding its political influence by supporting the country's nationalist political options and actively promoting the “Eurasian” option as an alternative to NATO and the EU. In order to propagate this political agenda, a narrative is placed in the public sphere, which emphasizes the similarities of the two peoples, as well as the Russian friendship towards the country, which is manifested through the official recognition of the Macedonian language and identity.

“They want us to think that NATO and the EU are not a good path for us, but an approach to the Asian alliance ... they manipulate the language, the identity, the acceptance, which means a lot to people ... they act through the narrative: look at the other countries that have joined EU and NATO, nothing is better for them. The main goal is for citizens not to want to join NATO and the EU.”

Pro-Russian narratives enter the media through multiple channels. Primarily, through neighboring Serbia, whose online media, tabloids and political TV shows with pronounced pro-Russian views are easily accessible and very influential to the Macedonian audience, as well as through local portals that in a race for an audience, without ideological tendency, republish news from Serbian media and spread disinformation and pro-Russian views.

“A lot of this disinformation comes from neighboring countries, from Serbia. Their tabloids are read directly here... and they are very influential. There are also political shows from Serbia that are popular in our country.”

Russian influence is also easily channeled through social media, where a critical group can be formed, such as the group “United Macedonia” or “I Boycott”, which filled in Twitter and managed to spread its narrative during the referendum on the country's entry into NATO. Such narratives are easily spread through Internet portals, and often penetrate traditional media, such as Alpha TV, for example.

“United Macedonia publishes disinformation from Russia. They are not even aware that this is disinformation; plus, there are others who trust them, comment on them and further spread this disinformation.”

Special attention was paid to the role of various political structures in the country, such as the political party “Levica”, which in its anti-NATO program and its strategic commitments acts in favor of Russian geopolitical interests, and which manages to

introduce pro-Russian narratives in the parliamentary debate. Pro-Russian views are also shared by other individuals in political life, such as Stevče Jakimovski, who spreads covert views, or Todor Petrov, who spreads openly pro-Russian views.

“We have a parliamentary party that is most openly pro-Russian, which has written in its program that NATO membership is unnecessary ... Aside from small political parties, now Russian influence is established in the political system itself and it is very public, we see meetings in the legislature home with the Russian ambassador in such a crisis. The party “Levica” is a representative of that mood, it is transparent and legitimate ...”

We should have a problem with those who ... claim to be pro-Western, but in fact, they are not. These are structures, I do not say they are political parties, but if you follow their public appearances, their rhetoric, you will see covert support for Russian aggression. Stevče Jakimovski’s party is not pro-Russian, but he expressed such views in his appearance on TV 24. If 15 years ago we had unity on some issues, now obviously we have an open debate and it is public and should be accepted. The pro-Russian mood is present ...”

In recent years, there has been increased activity of the Russian Embassy in the country, as well as the Russian Consulate in Ohrid.

Russian influence also receives active support from various tools for automated Internet propaganda, bots, troll farms, and hacking activities. The attack on the website of the State Statistical Office on the day the results of the last Census were published was linked to Russian interests in the country.

Think.mk is a site that has a lot of likes and which at the beginning started with the presentation of news with extremely entertaining content. The moment they reach a certain audience, they turned to political topics that deal with the war in Ukraine. You will see by the number of likes and the number of news shares that they are pro-Russian and that Putin is presented as a top leader, that they are not organic; those are the bots ... it can be seen which content this medium gives primacy to and which narrative it wants to spread to the public.”

“Some politicians and profiles have an unnaturally high number of likes, tweets, retweets and shares. I analyzed one profile, of MP Apasiev and most of them are automated, at least 30% when you analyze them. They do not tweet anything, they are bots, they just retweet.”

It was assessed that the long-term process of Euro-Atlantic integration of the country, which in recent years has demanded, and will in the future, require major political and social compromises, opens more and more space for penetrating pro-Russian geopolitical views, as the number of citizens and social actors grows, who favor political alternatives on the Euro-Atlantic path.

“The Eurasian Pact is Russian propaganda that is successful, both because it is organized and because European integration is stalled. In the Western

Balkan region, we can talk about a sustainable system where coordination and support from Moscow is no longer needed, but we have a system of individuals and media who believe in it and spread those illiberal narratives ... and that system is already self-sustaining."

"Apart from the direct (Russian influence) that is present in the media and social networks, there is a corpus of ideological influence that is indirect, which is not, say, pro-Russian on a platform of Russian support, but on anti-Western narratives and discourses. The spread of conspiracy theories, the existence of secret societies, the world government, it is a whole corps of anti-influences that is spreading and often highlighting the Satanism of the West."

In addition, the bad governance, i.e. the dysfunctionality of the democratic order in the country, gives rise to a "longing for a system" among a growing number of citizens, which opens space for placing narratives that affirm the autocratic principle, as a model that can ensure the functionality of society.

"When people want a 'firm hand' or an authoritarian regime, they usually want a system ... they think that if you have a ruler with a firm hand you will have clean roads, you will not die in a hospital, you will not ride a bus without a ticket, you will not need to know someone in a high position to get admitted to the hospital... So every failure of the system at home, absolutely every impunity, every weak reform in the judiciary, in education, in health, absolutely goes in the line of supporting these influences and supporting Russia, and all autocracies in general."

"They will go to Turkey and see a bridge that is top notch, or they will see the new airport and say, 'Erdogan is not a democrat, but he is building, the state is functioning.' Some moments like this, especially accompanied by the domestic failure of real reforms in certain fields, absolutely create fertile ground for self-deception that somewhere in autocracies or dictatorships people live better."

Autocratic narratives that undermine the democratic values that the state aspires to, are largely placed through Internet portals funded by structures behind the political figure of Victor Orban. Such media, taking advantage of the citizens' dissatisfaction with the current social situation in the country, place autocratic ideas as viable alternatives to the eroded system of government in the country.

"Orban's Hungary network remained active and focused on the Balkans. These are evolved forms of influence that are happening now without the notorious MPM, without that structure of multiple print media that MPM managed, now it is happening through the internet portals."

Turkish influence is primarily aimed at the Turkish ethnic community in the country, with which it communicates through the Turkish-language media, as well as through religious communities. In a wider context, the Turkish influence is in an

indirect way present in the national media because of the ubiquitous production of Turkish series.

“We can see this cultural influence through Turkish series. In the information part, it can also be said that an important process is the media segregation that takes place in Macedonia - Macedonians watch programs in Macedonian, Albanians in Albanian, and Turks in Turkish. The Turkish community is strongly influenced by Erdogan’s official policy, he is a very popular politician among them, so the influence is huge ...”

“Turkish influence may be felt by Turkish-speaking population; it is controlled and aimed at anti-Gjulen, i.e. pro-Erdogan views.”

Bulgarian influence in the media space was also clearly recognized. The primary source of disinformation was Petar Kolev’s party in Ohrid, which is directly funded by neighboring Bulgaria, as part of a network of “Bulgarian” organizations funded in the country. Disinformation is also spread through a number of Facebook groups and personal profiles of individuals. It has been noticed that certain political structures in the country place statements of nationalist political options in Bulgaria, such as Karakačanov’s party, on the domestic media and thus consciously manipulate public opinion on the issue of bilateral relations with Bulgaria.

| OPPORTUNITIES TO CHANGE MEDIA POLICIES

“Strict” regulation, i.e. the adoption of a law on disinformation, was not recognized as a solution to the problem of disinformation in the media, as it provides a legal mechanism for abuse by the ruling political structures and restriction of freedom of speech.

“Introducing some strict control or regulation ... borders on media censorship and restrictions on freedom of speech.”

“A law on disinformation can be a double-edged sword, because it depends on who will implement it and how, that situation can be very dangerous.”

Promoting self-regulatory mechanisms, as well as affirming fact-checking activities as a form of self-regulation within the media community, which can raise the level of professional and ethical standards in journalism, were considered the only correct approach to the problem.

In order to successfully deal with the problem of disinformation, within the existing legal regulations, greater activity is needed from the institutions, which should be much more dedicated to issues related to disinformation in the media.

“The institutions themselves do not understand that disinformation affects society, and they also do not take it seriously, but we have institutions that do not react with denials ... they allow disinformation to gain momentum.”

“It takes a lot of workshops with prosecutors and judges to recognize and understand that disinformation is a problem. They (judges and prosecutors) do not accept online media outlets because they are not subject to the law and can write whatever they want ... but a threat is a threat, no matter through which channel it is sent.”

“It is good to have a working body in the Assembly that will deal with disinformation as a problem, now (this problem) is broken up into committees and very rarely is the topic of disinformation discussed.”



RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the research process and data analysis within the project, the following recommendations were adopted:

- A systemic approach is needed to build a culture of critical thinking and social dialogue at all levels, starting with the education system, the relationship of institutions and stakeholders in all sectors, as well as at the family and individual level.
- Given the high multi-line polarization in the society, when preparing disinformation interventions it is important to make data-based decisions about whether it is effective to apply a confrontational approach in a given situation (through which polarization can be enhanced), or to strive through a broad and inclusive social dialogue to give all parties a chance to reconsider some of their values, perceptions and considerations.
- Susceptibility to conspiracy theories and other alternative narratives is a consequence of structural factors that need to be addressed by specific programs, rather than by pathology or practices of politicization, rejection, or ignorance.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE INSTITUTIONS

- Institutions, in partnership with the media and civil society organizations, need to create policies and mechanisms to develop media literacy and increase resistance to disinformation.
- In doing so, they should upgrade the Codes of Ethics that apply to their employees in order to incorporate the fight against disinformation as a core value and further development of appropriate work procedures.
- All institutions, especially those in the field of health, should support the media, services, organizations that work directly on the detection of disinformation related to Covid-19 by promoting the contents of their profiles on social networks and websites.
- State institutions from the legislative and executive branches should take a proactive role in strengthening the financial capacities of the media, as well as in creating a favorable environment for financial investments in the media industry.
- It is especially important to invest in raising awareness of the role of the media as drivers of democracy in society, and improving the situation with the media to be treated as a strategic goal.
- The Ministry of Education and Science, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, should establish a special fund to enable cooperation with the academic community, universities and scientific institutes in the direction

of implementation and scientific research on the presence of disinformation related to Covid-19.

- The Government of RNM should as soon as possible fully implement the “Action Plan for decisive action against the spread of disinformation”, whose draft version was presented to the public on July 24, 2019 and whose implementation is stalled, especially when it comes to the second part of the action plan entitled “Proactive measures”. It is high time for the Government to start implementing its own action plan, as follows:
 - activation of action group composed of officials at the highest level
 - implementation of the planned educational campaigns, both those intended for the public, and also the internal ones intended for the employees and officials in the public administration
 - opening the discussion with the media and non-governmental organizations on how to support the production of media content on the topic of combating disinformation.
- State institutions should initiate a process for creating a state strategy for combating disinformation that will take into account the experiences from the implementation of the Action Plan, as well as the needs for its upgrade in conditions of a pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRIVATE COMPANIES, MARKETING AGENCIES AND OTHER ADVERTISERS THAT ALLOW THE WORK OF MEDIA OUTLETS

- Advertisers should upgrade their codes of ethics and corporate social responsibility policies with criteria that will enable regular monitoring (monitoring) of whether they are used to sponsor media that spread disinformation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL MEDIA WORKERS I.E. JOURNALISTS

- Media workers, as well as the media as a whole, should strive for increased respect for professional and ethical standards in journalism, as well as increased application of self-regulatory tools.
- The media should actively participate in the fight against all types of disinformation and the promotion of media literacy by increasing the quality and diversity of media programs of informative and educational character.

- In case they do not have their own content, they should advocate for the transfer of fabricated content from all other fact-checking services or media that regularly debunk disinformation within their work.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS AND RELATED BODIES

- It is necessary to increase cooperation between professional media organizations as well as other institutions relevant to the media sector.
- It is extremely important to further promote the mechanisms of self-regulation as a means through which citizens have the opportunity to point out abuses by unethical media.
- In addition, it is important that public fact-checking activities be affirmed as a form of self-regulation within the media community, and as a means of encouraging public debate on the quality of media content and the kind of informal education with which professional standards are practically approaching a wider audience.

RECCOMENDATIONS FOR CSOs

- CSOs should continue to create and accumulate knowledge related to the problem of disinformation, building content archives that will gather knowledge and explanations for the exposed manipulations and disinformation, which are published under licenses that allow use by other bodies. An example of such a resource is the CriThink website (crithink.mk) which also contains an archive of analytical and educational articles and an e-library with multimedia content, digital editions and training materials. In that way, each of the civil society organizations will be able to download the content and disseminate it on their websites or social networks, to initiate and lead training projects for their target groups, as well as to contribute with their content in the same way.
- As many organizations as possible should commit to launch their own projects to work with the public on disinformation awareness or to join projects in that part of the NGO sector that is already working on debunking disinformation. At the same time, they should work on diversifying the target groups from their communities, which they will find to be most susceptible to the negative impact of disinformation. To consider different approaches to explaining the harmfulness of disinformation in different age groups, with special emphasis on young people;
- CSOs should create content and promotional campaigns to present to the public positive narratives based on facts, outlining measures to prevent the spread of the epidemic and the benefits of vaccination, in order to reduce vaccine hesitancy, but also the opposition of the use of Covid-19 vaccines.

- More local and grassroots CSOs need to be involved in efforts to increase media literacy and critical thinking in their communities at all levels: through curricula that they create independently or in collaboration with academia, specifically developed to combat disinformation about Covid-19, citing the current practice of fact-checkers in the country.
- CSOs working in the field of media literacy and fact checking will increase their influence and opportunities for cooperation by joining the national Media Literacy Network and regional or international networks designed to combat disinformation.
- CSOs should begin with lobbying and advocacy activities in order to increase the support of public and state institutions in the fight against disinformation and the strengthening of media literacy and strengthening critical thinking. In addition, there should be efforts of relevant state bodies (prosecution, judiciary) to enforce relevant laws against impunity, and for the government to continue to develop and implement public policy documents, starting with the second part of the Action Plan to resolutely combat disinformation.

